

## **SPEECH FOR THE COR PRESIDENT**

**BERLIN CONFERENCE 2021 – EUROPE BOTTOM-UP!**

**THE “EUROPE BOTTOM-UP PLATFORM” AND CITIES FOR EUROPE**

**9 NOVEMBER 2021, 13:15 – 16:00**

**KEYNOTE FOR THE 3<sup>RD</sup> PLENARY SESSION:**

**CITIES FOR EUROPE**

Dear Mayors,

Dear Experts,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honor for me to join you in Berlin in this historic day.

The day the Wall came down,

and the values of democracy, freedom, unity and peace won.

It is the fate of this City, that shielded the fate of our Union.

Because, without the unification of Germany,

the European Union, as we know it today, would not exist.

And this, ladies and gentlemen, is the biggest proof

that territories matter.

That cities, regions, villages

both throughout the course of our history,

but also through our common course towards the future,  
have an indispensable role to play for the European Project.

Cities are the keystones for defending our values against extremists and populists.

They are the enduring examples of what our Union can achieve through bringing down walls and building bridges.

They are true laboratories for enriching representative democracy and discovering new participatory practices.

Cities are the engines for our evolving European Democracy.

Because the community dimension of democracy is strong,  
and our cultural identities and backgrounds  
cannot be dissociated from our democratic identities.

Dear Friends,

I come from Greece, the place where democracy was born 2.000 years ago.

But for centuries, my country struggled through wars, occupation and dictatorships.

It was only by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
that Greece managed to overcome these obstacles  
and set its future course.

And one of the most defining moments was 40 years ago,  
the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1981,  
when Greece joined the EU.

40 years of democracy, peace and security in the European family.

40 years with our European identity co-existing with our national and regional and local identities.

I live in the beautiful city of Thessaloniki,

I am the Governor of the Region of Central Macedonia,  
the geographically largest region in Greece.

I am the President of the European Committee of the Regions,

I am a proud Greek and a proud European.

At the same time, I am a proud citizen of my city and my region.  
And this is what the European Committee of the Regions represents:  
The voice of the 1.2 million Governors, Presidents of Regions, Mayors,  
Regional and Local Councilors,  
from 240 regions and 90.000 municipalities all across Europe,  
And through them, through local leaders,  
some of which are taking part in this discussion panel,  
and amongst them my CoR colleagues,  
like Gerry Woop, State Secretary for Europe for Berlin,  
and Emil Boc, successful mayor of Cluj Napoca and former Prime Minister  
of Romania,  
we bring the voice and trust the people put in their regional and local  
leaders, to Brussels  
and at the same time, we work on territorializing EU law.  
So it's addition to the Bundesrat that represents the voice of German  
regions in the European Council,  
you have a strong ally,  
so that together with the European Committee of the Regions,  
you will create the needed critical mass in order to secure the territorial  
aspect of EU legislation.  
Because no matter how big and strong,  
no one today, can succeed alone.  
And after all, dear colleagues,  
it is us, the regional and local authorities,  
who implement European legislation, on the ground.  
70% of all EU projects are implemented by regions and cities.  
We are responsible for one third of public spending  
and half of public investment.  
We are on the frontline throughout the pandemic, saving people's lives  
and jobs.  
We continue to provide quality public services,

despite increasing costs and decreasing incomes,  
Our 2021 "Annual Regional and Local Barometer",  
our evidence-based political initiative  
that takes the pulse of our regions, cities and villages,  
tells us that in 2020,  
Europe's regional and local authorities  
increased expenditure while seeing their revenues fall.  
This is what we call the "scissors effect".  
And this translates into a gap of around 180 billion euros.  
For Germany alone, the gap is 111 billion euros.  
This gap needs to be closed,  
partly with EU funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility,  
that's why we insisted that regions and cities must take part both in the  
design and the implementation stages.  
However, our Barometer shows that 65% of leaders from regions, cities  
and villages  
feel they do not have enough influence in the EU.  
And 86% think that strengthening subnational government in EU decision  
making  
would improve EU democracy.  
These figures tell a true story that goes beyond the scissors effect.  
The story of a democracy that works in partnership, unity and cohesion.  
The story of our people who want a European Union that delivers results  
at the level closest to its citizens.  
Otherwise more and more people will start questioning our Union's very  
existence.  
And this is why the EU can no longer remain a top-down territorially blind  
project.  
Only through a bottom-up and a values-based approach,  
Europe can re-build citizens' trust.  
Let me share two examples, ladies and gentlemen.

First, the climate emergency.

We deliver 70% of climate-change reduction measures.

And up to 90% of adaptation measures in our villages, cities and regions.

These figures tell us that we are indispensable for fighting climate change.

Yet, we are not at the table at the COP26 negotiations in Glasgow,

and even beforehand, we were not sufficiently consulted.

So I ask you to join me in our call to Executive Vice-President Timmermans,

as the EU's negotiator,

to ensure that the regional and local dimension is included in the Glasgow COP26 conclusions.

In that context, I have already sent a letter to all 27 EU Environment Ministers, including the German minister,

to acknowledge this reality.

My second example is the Conference on the Future of Europe.

It is true that it offers a real opportunity

to rethink the functioning of our European democracy.

But what we said from the start

is that we are not interested in a "beauty contest" between the EU institutions.

We want the Conference to go beyond Brussels, Strasbourg and the Capitals,

and this is the commitment of the 30 members of the regional and local delegation to the Conference,

coming both from our House and regions and cities all across Europe.

For all of us, this is an opportunity to bring Europe closer to its people.

And this is the work we do towards this direction:

First of all, we have set up a High Level Group on European Democracy led by Herman Van Rompuy

to provide strategic political analysis on the role of local and regional authorities in the EU democracy.

Second, we are organizing a wide series of Local Dialogues in regions and cities all across Europe,

in order to listen to the people and bring their voices to Brussels.

We are also organizing a series of CoR plenary debates on the functioning of European democracy.

throughout the duration of the Conference,

a political process that will lead to our European Summit of Regions and Cities,

in March 2022, in Marseille.

Furthermore, we are establishing the Alliance of Strong Regions.

And finally, we have put forward the concept of "Local EU Councillors"

to be established in municipalities across Europe,

alongside the main European actors.

The idea is that regional and local assemblies will designate councilors responsible for European Affairs,

and I would like to encourage you all

to develop such a program as a bottom-up, voluntary initiative.

Ladies and gentlemen,

All politics are local.

So in this spirit, allow me to conclude with a call to the new German Government:

Let's work together, let's cooperate closely,

building on Chancellor Angela Merkel's legacy,

of openness to work with local and regional authorities

as showcased by her visit to our plenary session last year.

Let's extend the successful German Landers system, to the European level too.

The time is now.

The European Committee of the Regions is already in cooperation with:

Charles Michel, President of the European Council and former mayor of Wavre,

The Portuguese Prime Minister Costa, who was the former Mayor of Lisbon,

The Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, who was the Mayor of Sibiu for 14 years.

And also, Olaf Scholz was the Mayor of Hamburg.

From the experience these Leaders hold,

from the city-state level,

is key in understanding the crucial role of the grassroots level to our democracy.

The House of European democracy which I see as,

European Union being the protective roof,

Member States the strong walls,

and Regional and Local Authorities the solid foundations.

So let's work in synergy and partnership,

in unity and solidarity,

let's join our forces

to win back people's trust, minds and hearts.

Let's bring Europe closer to its citizens.

We can do it.

Together.

Thank you!.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY